

## 'Elle': How Paul Verhoeven Cut the Complex Rape Thriller

Editor Job ter Burg kept the pace intense and intimate in France's Foreign-Language Oscar contender, starring Isabelle Huppert.



**Bill Desowitz**

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**Directed by Paul Verhoeven**

**Isabelle Huppert, Laurent Lafitte, Anne Consigny, Charles Berling, Virginie Efira, Christian Berkel**

With Cannes and New York Film Festival entry “[Elle](#),” [Paul Verhoeven](#)’s first French-language film (and France’s foreign-language Oscar submission), the director combines his fascination with sex and violence in a throwback to his early Dutch period. Thus the rape revenge thriller (Sony Pictures Classics, November 16) is more character-driven

than “Basic Instinct,” yet has wry humor like “RoboCop.”

[Isabelle Huppert](#), in a tour-de-force performance, plays Michelle, the owner of a video game company who’s attacked in her home by a masked assailant, which unravels a complicated web of personal and professional relationships, and a horrifying past that has made her family a pariah in the community.

For Dutch editor Job ter Burg, who doesn’t speak French and communicated with Verhoeven mostly in English, it was an opportunity to explore an ambiguous character and immerse the viewer in her social network. But without eroticism.

“I think what drew Paul to [‘Elle’] is that it is mostly about this woman dealing with the people around her and these social interactions are at the core and define her character,” ter Burg told IndieWire.



**“Elle”**

SBS Productions

Ter Burg had the freedom to concentrate on specific sequences rather than providing an early assembly; the editor and director then honed them together. And it certainly helped that cinematographer Stéphane Fontaine (“Jackie”) shot with two Red cameras for greater efficiency, intimacy and dynamics.

The opening reveals the aftermath of the rape with unnerving restraint. There’s a closeup of Michelle’s cat and off-screen screams; then stillness as she cleans up shattered glass; and a cleansing bath where she wipes away the blood.

“At some point we decided you should hear fighting and [her screams] and a man climaxing,” ter Burg said. “And it required some trickery to get the right look of the cat, which was quite powerful. But after that the pacing was very delicate.”

He focused on the details. “I really like the slowness just before she starts cleaning up and the harsh sound of her sweeping up the glass. And then having her in the tub, which is is silent. Also, in sound and motion, there are some very dramatic ups and downs in that.”



## **“Elle”**

Sony Pictures Classics

The most challenging sequence was a long Christmas party at Michelle’s house, which interweaves her social network. It took time juggling characters and not getting too heavy. “What we really liked is that you essentially have nearly all of the characters at that table, together, which is something you don’t often see,” ter Burg said. “At the same time, it meant finding a delicate balance between all those characters and making sure you got the [growing attraction] between Michelle and Patrick [her neighbor played by Laurent Lafitte]. It was great to wiggle all the other characters in between, shot at various angles with those two cameras and all the actors present.”

Eventually, of course, the rapist shows up again — and that’s when the cat and mouse begins and the

violence becomes much more graphic. It was tough for the editor to watch the footage over and over again.

“That starts to bum you out,” he said. “At the same time, it was necessary to search for that nastiness and make sure it played well. It was quite heavy, especially the aftermath. How you deal with violence all around you and let that be a part of your life? There are many questions like that raised.”

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